

The role of special exhibition “The Natural History of Gunma”: a device to connect the environmental organizations and the general public

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Abstract

The museum exhibition is one of the most effective device to attract the interest of general public. The project “Gunma no Shizen” or the Natural History of Gunma (GS) aims to connect the self-motivated environmental organizations and the general public using its special exhibition as a device.

The conservation of biodiversity and maintaining their sustainability are a negotiated outcome. It depends on how the people think about taking care of nature based on their society and cultural values. The project GS has been enhancing visitor engagement to change the human interact with nature for the last 10 years. The project comprises two parts: the special exhibition and the session. It integrates scientific research, environmental conservation activities, artistic activities, and educational activities of over 40 organizations, including environmental organizations, high schools and universities, creating a natural history network with a local museum serving as its core.

However, it appears that “environmental conservation” is still considered a high threshold and a barrier for the general public to be self-motivated to get involved. In order to attract and engage general public to change the mindset and take actions the project GS needs to provide more meaningful personal connection with nature. From the comments from the general visitors, it is necessary to provide wonder and awe through experience and empathy by blending recreation and interactive-experience-based exhibition and educational programs to create a moment where an audience will fall in love with nature.

Keywords: biodiversity, special exhibition, natural history network

1. Introduction

The museum exhibition is one of the most effective device to attract the interest of general public. The project “Gunma no Shizen” or the Natural History of Gunma (GS) aims to connect the self-motivated environmental organizations and the general public using its special exhibition. The conservation of biodiversity and maintaining their sustainability depends on how the people think about taking care of nature. Not only the self-motivated environmental organizations, but also involving non-museum people enhancing self-interested motives to take care of nature as if it was one’s self.

The GS started as an administrative session open to the public in 2009 (table 1) at Gunma

Museum of Natural History with collaboration of Natural Environment Division of the Gunma Prefecture, Japan. There was a need from the public wanting to know about what the prefectural government and our museum are doing about the research and environmental conservation activities. To start up the project, it was difficult to gain a full understanding and an agreement from the managerial post. Therefore, we started out small, focusing only on mammals and nuisance wildlife problems, which was and still is one of major issues that we face today.

In 2010, taking advantage of the growing awareness toward biodiversity due to the tenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the CBD (COP10) held in Aichi Prefecture, Japan, we decided to expand our scope focusing on the biodiversity and maintaining their sustainability. The GS session became more inclusive covering variety of fields by involving environmental organizations, research centers, universities, and high schools with-in and outside of Gunma Prefecture as presenters of the session.

By 2015, there were 32 organizations participating in the project (table 1), receiving over 100 participants every year. Like Osaka Natural History Festival: Osaka Museum of Natural History, and Kyosei-no-hiroba: Museum of Nature and Human Activities, Hyogo, there are events where NPO`s, NGO`s, environmental organizations, companies, museums, and researchers gather together and exchange knowledge and information. However, in response to the requests for posting the posters for longer period at GS, we have decided to make and expand the session into a special exhibition hoping to gain more interest of the general public.

However, it appears that “environmental conservation” is still considered a high threshold and a barrier for the general public to be self-motivated to get involved. In this paper, we present our trials of the project GS trying to provide wonder, awe and meaningful personal connections to the general public through special exhibition by blending recreation and interactive-experience-based education.

2. Design of the project

The project GS comprises two parts: the special exhibition and the workshop/sessions. It integrates scientific research, environmental conservation activities, artistic activities, and educational activities.

However, there is one rule: no selling, and no recruitment. The admission fee to the special exhibition is free of charge.

1) Special exhibition

The special

date	Keynote speech	Number of oral presentation	Number of posters	Number of organizations	Number of participants GS session	Number of visitors	comments
2009.3.1	-	15	-	8	140	-	
2010.2.21	-	16	-	11	160	-	
2011.3.21	-	-	-	7	-	-	Session canceled: Great East Japan earthquake
2012.2.12	1	10	1	10	80	-	
2013.2.9	1	7	28	17	129	-	
2014.2.16	-	-	23	18	-	-	Postponed: heavy snow exhibiting posters 3.14-4.19
2015.2.15	-	6	48	32	120	-	2Ju-maru, biodiversity-partner project
2016.1.16-2016.2.21	1	5	59	42	130	10,263	
2017.1.14-2017.2.19	1	5	50	37	100	11,792	Symposium: endangered species 2017.1.29
2018.1.13-2018.2.18	1	5	56	41	150	12,068	
2019.1.19-2019.2.24	1	5	61	42	130	13,972	United Nations Decade on Biodiversity project

exhibition is based on the posters provided mainly by the organizations participating in the poster presentation in the GS session. We encourage the organizations to make use of our specimen collections in creating their display. Making an exhibition a participatory for the organizations is important.

Recent general visitors to the museum tend to expect spectacular and emotional experience as a part of recreation. There is an obvious difference in the mindset toward nature between the general visitors and organizations participating in the session. We need to bridge this gap by introducing experience-oriented works and making the exhibit a “comfortable” place to stay.

2) Sessions

The networking event consist of keynote speech, oral presentation and poster presentation. It is an event, which will take place on the first day of the special exhibition. We choose a theme for the keynote speech and oral presentation to develop the fundamental strength of the participants.

3. Issues to be solved

We have over 10,000 visitors during the GS special exhibition period, increasing in their numbers (table 1). However, large portion of visitors encounter the special exhibition after they entered the museum (table 2), whereas participants of the session knew that the session would take place before hand (table 3). The improvement in public relations to attract visiting public is a necessity.

The satisfaction levels of visitors for the exhibition contents were relatively high with 5: vary satisfied ranging from 43% to 66%, 4: satisfied ranging from 24% to 41% and meeting their expectations (table 2), we see a few percentage of people felt that the exhibition is not suitable for them, rather contents are too difficult. We must say the exhibition had no effect on

date	n	knew that the exhibition would take place		contents					expectations			anything new from the session				any change in your actions				
		yes	no	5	4	3	2	1	beyond expected	as expected	below	new information, new knowledge	updated the knowledge	no information	no interest	take action	want to learn	experience nature	think about nature	no change
2017.1.14-2017.2.19	133	22	7	88	32	5	8	0	6	23	0	28	1	0	0	77	46	5	0	5
2018.1.13-2018.2.18	188	12	58	91	69	20	3	5	63	95	13	141	22	8	10	39	74	31	15	8
2019.1.19-2019.2.24	107	44	56	46	44	12	2	3	41	56	4	73	12	8	7	18	54	29	9	7

date	n	knew that the session would take place		contents					expectations			anything new from the session				any change in your actions				
		yes	no	5	4	3	2	1	beyond expected	as expected	below	new information, new knowledge	updated the knowledge	no information	no interest	take action	want to learn	experience nature	think about nature	no change
2012.2.12	45	34	7	33	2	5		3	13	30	2	41	-	4	0	-	-	-	-	-
2013.2.9	27	25	2	25	1	1		0	5	21		23	-	4	0	-	-	-	-	-
2014.2.16	44	-	-	32	2	5		3	13	29	2	40	-	4	0	-	-	-	-	-
2015.2.15	37	30	6	34	3	0	0	0	6	31	0	36	-	0	1	7	21	7	1	0
2016.1.16	82	56	22	18	60	3		1	23	56	1	76	2	1	1	22	40	12	5	3
2017.1.14	34	32	1	7	22	0	0	0	6	33	0	28	1	0	0	6	17	2	2	0
2018.1.13	34	29	5	12	22	0	0	0	9	25	0	33	1	0	0	13	19	5	0	0
2019.1.19	61	-	-	12	22	0	0	0	9	25	0	53	2	4	1	20	29	19	2	0

their attitude toward nature. Since the questionnaire recovery rate is low, we should think that there are more visitors feeling uncomfortable about the exhibition.

The comments from the visitors also consistent with the results shown on table 2 and table 3. Many of the comments wrote how they were amazed by the quality of the research presented by high school students. Others wrote they were happy and excited to take a closer look at the large stuffed mammals, such as *Ursids*, *Capricornisis*, *Cervids*, and *Suids*, and freeze dried *Fungis*. Some parents wrote they enjoyed the exhibition with their children hoping to become involved with scientific research and environmental conservation.

To make the exhibition more attractive for every visitors, we could use the following comments from the visitors as an advice. 1) create more comfortable space using more graphics: spatial presentation, 2) increase hands-on specimens: experience-based exhibition, and 3) introduce educational activities, such as coloring book: after care to talk about the exhibition at home. Look and feel, focusing on emotion of the visitors would be a keyword for visitors to first fall in love with nature, then wanting to learn about nature and start to take care of nature as if its one`s self.

4. Future of project GS

Bridging the difference in the consciousness toward nature and environmental conservations between the general public and environmental organizations is not easy. To meet the expectations of the general public as an exhibit, the GS exhibition needs to be more experience-oriented, blending recreation and science as an entrance gate to the environmental conservation. The exhibition needs to be followed up with strategic educational programs in order to further persuade visitors to learn more about nature. A combination of attractive exhibition and effective education program will, hopefully, bring the general visitors to the next stage, taking care of nature.

The role-sharing and creating a sustainable management system is a major issue to the continuity of the project. The GS has become one of the major project where the entire museum staffs are involved. It is important for the staffs to understand its mission, share the passion and help the session participants behind the scenes. Keeping the first principle of aid, the respect (Schumacher, 1993), we should not initiate or motivate, but help them to find the knowledge because the motivations to their personal growth must come from their personal interest. The museum needs to work one-on-one, capturing the passion and energy, digging up the potential needs and wants, creating a network like a hive, a social infrastructure that does not exist. Using exhibition as a device, we hope that this network will diffuse like a wave in the general public, involving more people in the environmental conservation.

Reference

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